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**Testimony of**

**Bill FINCH  
MAYOR,  
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**to the**

**EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**March 10, 2008**

Greetings, Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Education Committee. For the record, my name is Bill Finch, Mayor of the City of Bridgeport.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify before you this afternoon on a few of the education bills that are now before you.

**House Bill No. 5026, An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget  
Recommendations Regarding Education; and Raised Bill No. 614, An Act  
Concerning the Recommendations by the Legislative Commissioners for  
Technical Revisions to Education Statutes**

Much could and should be said about the urgency of systemic school finance reform, including the restructuring of Connecticut's tax system to shift the primary burden of school funding to the state, thereby lessening the heavy burden on local property taxes. As a former State Senator who sat on this Committee, I often argued these points myself. Now, as Mayor of the City of Bridgeport, it seems all the more urgent.

Written testimony filed today by the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding, of which the City and Board of Education of Bridgeport are founding members, addresses the real decline in Education Cost Sharing per pupil entitlements over the past 12 years. What is also fact is that between 1989-90 and 2006-07—the period following the inception of the ECS—total ECS entitlements actually failed to keep pace with inflation, with the 2007-08 allocation being the first real increase (7%) in ECS aid in 19 years.

As one of the poorest cities in the nation, you can probably guess how Bridgeport has fared over these past years: Poorly! As the new Mayor of Bridgeport, I would like to share with you just a few of the many facts that relate to school funding and the severe fiscal challenges my city faces in attempting to fill the huge gap between the resources our schools need and the resources that are actually available. In this manner, it should be quite apparent how inadequate and inequitable the state's current education funding system is, as described in Bills 5026 and 614 and in already existing statutes.

- Bridgeport's per capita income ranks 168<sup>th</sup> (just above Hartford) in the state, at \$16,306 or just 57% of the state average; and household income is 64% of the state median.
- Bridgeport's 2007-08 mill rate is 41.28, 6<sup>th</sup> highest in the state and compared with the state average of 25.42; our 2006 equalized mill rate is 19.93, 6<sup>th</sup> highest in the state and compared with a statewide average of just 13.18.
- We serve approximately 22,300 students, of which 95% are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, 91% are minorities, 40% live in homes where English is not the primary language spoken, and 35% of all entering kindergartners have received no formal preschool experience.
- Despite our predominately high-needs student population and our ever-higher mill rates to support the schools, our 2006-07 net current expenditure per pupil (NCEP) reached just \$11,321, or 89<sup>th</sup> in the state and below the state average of \$11,879, with 67% of our funding coming from the state (73%, with school construction). Some 20% of our \$253 million operations budget is spent on the 10% of students who require special education services. (I will save my comments about special education funding for a later date when those related bills come up for public hearing.)
- Important to the ECS calculation, Bridgeport's 2007-08 adjusted equalized net grand list per capita (AENGL) is \$10,551 and ranked 168<sup>th</sup>, compared to the average Connecticut town AENGL of \$67,511. (Greenwich's AENGL is 58.5 times greater than Bridgeport's.)
- Also important to our ECS calculation is ECS town wealth, which for 2007-08 is \$42,948, ranked 165<sup>th</sup>, as compared with \$195,954 for the average Connecticut town.

To this grim fiscal portrait, I must also make note of the \$108.3 million in capped ECS funds that Bridgeport should have received over the years since the FY96 cap was first instigated. Moreover, our per pupil allocation, in real terms, declined in value by 8.9% over that same time period.

It should therefore come to no surprise to you that I urge this esteemed Committee to strongly recommend to increase the FY09 ECS entitlement well beyond the currently budgeted 4.4% increase.

Not just in Bridgeport, but across the state the cost of public education has increasingly become a local burden. For public education to meet the needs of all Connecticut cities and towns, funding must be first and foremost a state, not a local, responsibility. And while 67% of Bridgeport's education expenditures are being provided by the state, these expenditures are but a portion of what the true cost of providing the city's high-needs students with a quality education comparable to that provided their peers just down the highway.

Unfortunately, we can sit here all night and argue about the impact of too little state aid on local mill rates and the pain caused taxpayers due to the over-reliance on regressive tax structures, but it is the future of Bridgeport children and those who live and attend schools in every community across this great state whose futures are most placed in jeopardy due to the abdication of the state's constitutional duty to adequately fund our schools.

**Senate Bills 644, An Act Concerning a Study of the Open Choice Program, and 645, An Act Concerning a Study of Issues Concerning the Interdistrict Magnet School Program**

I encourage further study of the funding issues pertaining to Open Choice and the interdistrict magnets. In particular, the reduction in ECS need student counts, beginning in FY09, could be devastating for magnet schools as well as for the budgets of sending and receiving districts. With both Open Choice and interdistrict magnets being successful educational strategies aimed at promoting voluntary deseg and improving urban education, it is ironic that the greatest fiscal pain of the new provisions would hit urban centers the most. Let's get this policy mistake resolved before it does serious harm. Connecticut should be growing interdistrict magnets through fiscal incentives, not discouraging their continuance by bean-counter budget slashing.

In closing, I wish again to thank this Committee for hearing my testimony, and I join other colleagues here today in urging you to resist any new education mandates this year that will place additional fiscal stress on municipalities and their boards of education. I also urge you to resist proposals for property tax caps, as they would surely further impair the already limited ability of municipalities to raise revenues to support the local schools.